

Americans Deserve Trustworthy Government

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While the conversation around America's dinner tables may not reflect Washington's current obsession with who is up and who is down in the latest ethics scandal, it is important to every American to have an ethical government. Trust between government and the people is essential in a democracy, and if that trust is broken, it must be restored.

Clearly, there are problems in the role lobbyists have played in the political process in recent years. Some lobbyists and some Members of Congress have pled guilty to felony crimes. These matters must be fully investigated, and those who have broken the law should be fully prosecuted, without regard to any political consequences.

Some changes are called for, but rather than just passing a new bill in order to get the controversy behind us, we should reflect upon some basic truths:

1. We put a special trust in those elected to represent us in government. Congress is in many ways a reflection of the country - good and bad. Yet, we still expect more of our elected representatives and others in positions of trust. With responsibility over the lives of others goes a higher expectation or standard. Men and women are flawed, and government by men and women will also be flawed. But, we should not lower our standards, even when some let us down.

2. As long as government decisions matter, there will be those who try to shape or influence those decisions. In fact, we expect that. It is enshrined in the First Amendment's protection of freedom of speech and right to petition the government. We cannot - and we should not try - to prevent citizens, as individuals or in groups, from trying to influence governmental decisions. But those efforts should be out in the open.

3. The bigger and more complicated government gets, the more opportunities there are for abuse. The more money government takes and spends, the more opportunities exist for special interest provisions. The same is true with ethics rules. Government ethics rules work best when there are a few clear, common sense lines between what is permitted and what is not. The more complex the rules are, the easier they are to manipulate and the harder they are to follow and to enforce. A few clear rules with effective disclosure and a system of accountability to handle those who cross the lines should be the goal.

We should not expect that any law or regulation will eliminate greed or ambition, but we should look for some common sense reforms that make it less likely someone will abuse the system.

One example is to take away special access to the Capitol complex for former Members of Congress and staff who are lobbyists. Another is to require more disclosure from lobbyists on their activities. I was surprised to learn recently that lobbyists in Austin have more disclosure requirements than those in Washington. Making lobbying information public makes it easier to find those who cross the line and to hold them accountable. Other reforms will be considered related to pensions of those convicted of a felony, privately funded travel, and stricter limits on commemorative items and meals.

In addition, I think that it is important to make serious changes to the growing trend of earmarking funds for particular projects, rather than allowing funds to be distributed through formulas or competitive grants. Earmarks by definition are special interest legislation, and their use invites abuse.

Attempts to regulate money in politics always have unintended consequences. Some argue that the tightened limits on money going to political parties passed in 2002 only fueled the tremendous growth of the so-call "527 organizations," which carry on their own constant campaigns promoting their agenda and attacking opponents. We should take a fresh look at whether those changes helped or made things worse.

We should always remember, however, that no law and no reform can ensure an ethical government. That can only happen when individuals in government try to make the best decisions they can for the right reasons day after day. Individual integrity, especially in those elected to represent us, is the best and only guarantee of an ethical government. Sometimes those we count on will let us down, and we must have ways of addressing those instances within the system. But just as we try to teach our children that it is character that matters most, it is true in government as well.

I am sure most of you have heard something about Medicare Part D, the new prescription drug coverage for seniors. All Medicare beneficiaries are eligible for it. It is a voluntary benefit. No one is required to take it. However, an important deadline is coming up for those who would like this coverage.

The first enrollment period for Medicare Part D ends May 15, 2006. If you are currently on Medicare - and you want to add this benefit - you must enroll by that deadline to avoid a possible penalty. Those currently eligible for the benefit could be charged higher premiums if they sign up after May 15.

Almost 28 million people across the country are already enrolled and receiving the new prescription drug benefit. In our congressional district, approximately 60 percent of those eligible have signed up for the benefit.

The Department of Health and Human Services estimates this coverage will save seniors an average of \$1,100 a year on the cost of their medicines. Some retirees will save significantly more than that average. But, Medicare Part D does not give enrollees all of their medicine for free. And, it is not a typical "one size fits all" government program. It is insurance provided by private companies with part of the cost paid by the government. Like other insurance, there are premiums, deductibles, co-pays, and other costs.

Medicare Part D could be a big help for those with very high drug expenses. Under the standard plan, once a beneficiary's out-of-pocket drug expenses for one calendar year reaches \$3,600, they will be required to pay just 5 percent (or a small co-payment) for the rest of their drug purchases that year. All of their other drug purchase costs will be covered by the plan.

There is also extra assistance available for those with a low income. For Medicare beneficiaries who meet the eligibility guidelines, the savings on drug purchases will be substantial. Millions of low income Medicare beneficiaries could pay no more than \$5 per prescription.

The prescription drug benefit will help many people, but it is still important to remember that it is not mandatory. You may decide you do not want it. You may already be receiving good coverage through another source such as an employer or a union.

If you decide to accept this benefit, you will need to find a coverage plan that is right for you. About 20 organizations have been approved by Medicare to sell plans in Texas. Companies offering this insurance must meet certain requirements such as covering all medically necessary drugs. But, these companies are also competing with each other on things like prices and how benefits are packaged. People looking for the plan that is right for them will need to carefully examine what is offered. In most cases, beneficiaries will be able to change plans once a year.

If you need more information about this new coverage, there is a good website at www.medicare.gov. You may also call Medicare's toll-free number, 1-800-MEDICARE.

The May 15 deadline is important, but there is still plenty of time to do the research necessary to make the best decisions. Family and friends can help you.

I also encourage you to call my office if I can help provide you with information.